



Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes

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Allan Sekula
Geography Lesson:
Canadian Notes

. . . there must be arranged a comprehensive system of exchanges, so that there might grow up something like a universal currency of these banknotes, or promises to pay in solid substance, which the sun has engraved for the great Bank of Nature.

Oliver Wendell Holmes,
“The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” 1859



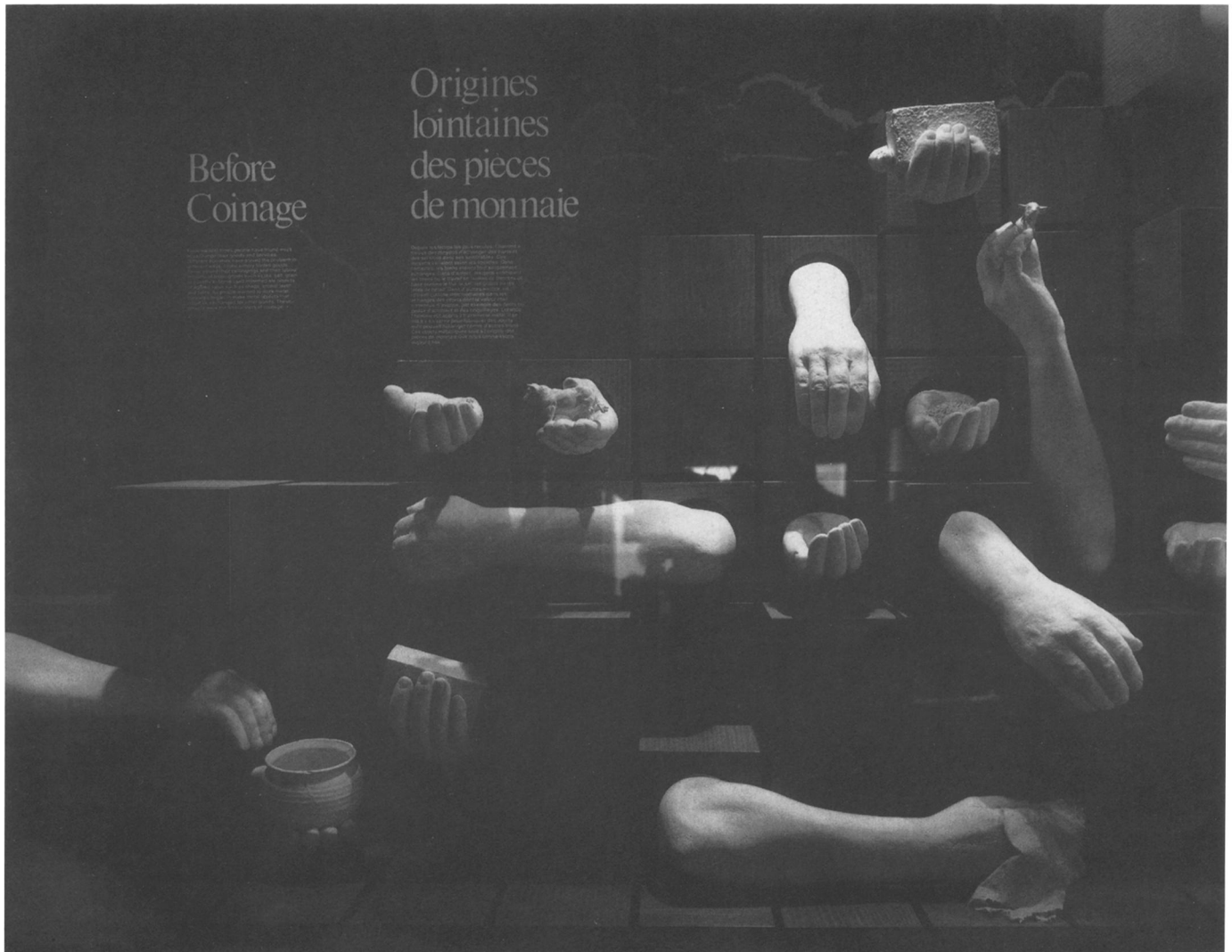
Yap Stone, Garden Court, Bank
of Canada, Ottawa



Slag, Sudbury (Original in color)



Arthur Erickson with Marani,
Rounthwaite and Dick, Bank of
Canada, February 1986
(Original in color)



Currency Museum, Bank of Canada



Ottawa, looking west along
Wellington Street from
Parliament Hill. *Second building on left*, Bank of Canada
(Original in color)



Photographer with two views
of Parliament Hill from Hull,
Quebec



Garden Court, Bank of Canada



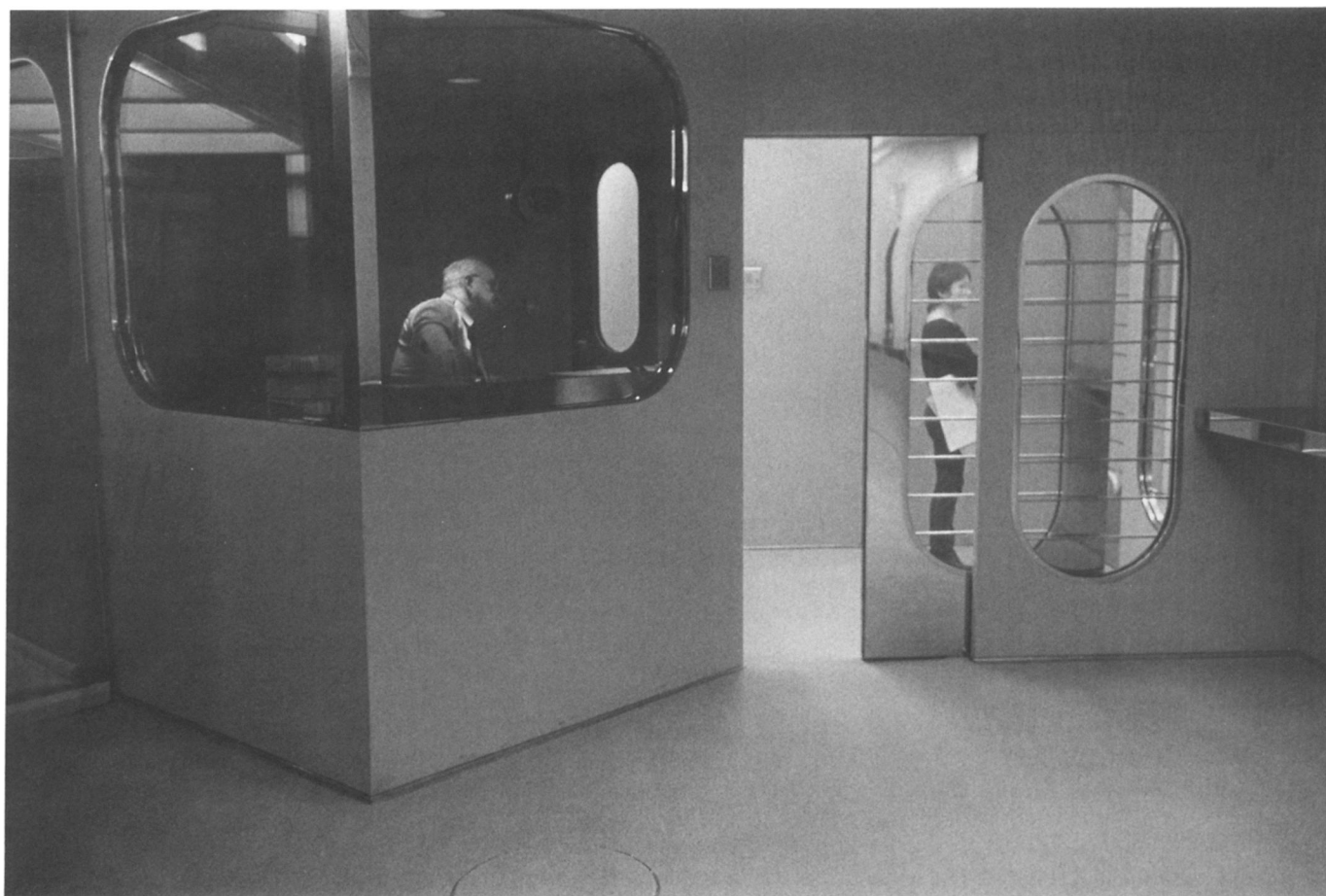
Fertilizer, Garden Court, Bank
of Canada



Posing for wedding
photographs, Garden Court,
Bank of Canada



Garden Court, Bank of Canada



Worker passing through bandit
trap, Bank of Canada



Downtown shopping mall,
Sudbury



Experimental vegetable farming in nonproducing mine, Big Nickel Mine, Sudbury



Big Nickel Mine, Sudbury



Sudbury (Original in color)



Ottawa (Original in color)

Allan Sekula is an artist and critic. He is the director of the photography program at the California Institute of the Arts and the author of *Photography against the Grain* (The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).

The complete version of this work was first exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts in the winter of 1986–87 and is currently on a tour in the United States and Canada. A book version is in preparation.

Both the text and the photographic sequence have been abridged and somewhat revised for this publication.

Photographs and text © 1988 Allan Sekula

For citizens of the United States, Canada is typically neither here nor there. “Canada” occupies a zone of conceptual indifference: unthought, insignificant, simultaneously the same and different, but in ways that do not seem to matter much in an “American” scheme of things.

For Canadians, the United States is both here and there: insistent, present, pressing, and beckoning from below. As the novelist Margaret Atwood put it recently, playing on a reassuring geopolitical cliché, Canadians peer through “the longest undefended one-way mirror in the world.” This persistent sense of difference, of being positioned always in relation to a permeable border, to a vast dominating Other, is repeated and doubled within Canada in the experience of various minorities, primarily, but not exclusively, among the large minority of French speakers. The ambiguities of these positionings, the insistence of voices that are “American” — or “English” — may well result in a “Canada” that is neither here nor there for Canadians.

These ambiguities are more than linguistic or cultural in character. A recent survey of the Canadian economy in the British business magazine *The Economist* suggested rather slyly that Canada has been in the vanguard of advanced industrial nations: “Canada’s close links with the American economy have long since deprived it of the freedom to set its own fiscal and monetary policies, a liberty which other industrial countries — except the United States — have finally lost only in recent years. . . . It was a Canadian, after all, who coined the term ‘global village.’ ”

My photographs and writing here began with a recognition of an occasional act of forgetting: forgetting that I was in a foreign country. I began also with a fascination with the most trivial signs of national difference, with the mild unfamiliarities of foreign currency. If money is peculiar, simultaneously abstract and concrete, what is especially peculiar about Canadian money? What mysteries lurk in these innocent and optimistic engravings depicting a productive, industrialized Nature? How is this imagery repeated in an official architecture of Canadian finance, and within the productive (and not so productive) “landscape” itself?

The preceding photographs were made in late August and early November 1985 and in late February 1986. They were made in two cities: in the Canadian capital, Ottawa, which overlooks Quebec from the edge of English-speaking Canada, and in the economically hard-pressed northern Ontario industrial city of Sudbury. Sudbury is the center of the largest nickel mining and smelting complex in the world. The region’s economy is dominated by the Canadian multinational firm Inco, formerly the International Nickel Company of Canada. Inco subsidiaries also operate in Indonesia, Guatemala, and the United States.

In Ottawa, I photographed the headquarters of the Bank of Canada, the federal agency charged with regulating the Canadian economy. The original building, an abstracted, modernized neoclassical monument to Keynesian economics, was completed in 1938. The Canadian architect Arthur Erickson’s addition to the original structure was completed in 1979. What are we to make of the imaginary geography sustained within this structure? What do the meanings generated by this architecture have to do with life in Sudbury, in Canada, and by implication, with life in the larger world of late capitalism? I will begin with this crude observation: Erickson embedded the original building in a glass box, rather as if a brick had been frozen halfway into a block of ice.

I first saw the Bank of Canada in October 1982. It was cold, colder than Ohio, but water was still flowing in the shallow moat that flanks the south face of the building. Later, in winter, the drained moat would fill with snow. I

made a few photographs on this first visit — no more than casual notes describing the moat, the glass face of the building, the pool and garden and big stone coin visible through this reflective surface, and behind and within this little tropical landscape, the older bank.

I thought initially that this building could be the subject of a film, a “film about money,” about wealth, about the circulation of commodities, and at the same time, a film about architecture, more specifically, about the ideological work performed by architecture. This desire to make a film persisted until I realized that this building was best understood not only in terms of movement, but also in terms of arrested movement, artificial stasis, and thrift. We know that architects build with an eye for the look of their work in still photographs. And only still photography, the art of compulsive collectors and archivists, could adequately describe (and share) the retentive character of this particular building, this turd in a vitrine.

This building occupies a position that is both metropolitan and peripheral in the world economy. Unlike many national banks much further south, it is not grappling with a massive debt owed the multinational commercial banks of the north. But more than other national banks in the north, this bank does not run its own show. How better to help question the metropolitan ambitions of the Canadian bourgeoisie than by approaching the Bank of Canada from its “own” peripheries, from Sudbury, a place secretly regarded by many respectable and even ecologically sensitive North Americans as the asshole of Canada?

Realizing that all physiological metaphors are suspect, I’ll propose a provisional anatomy of the Canadian body politic: The brain, in Ottawa, is worrying about its asshole, forgetting its asshole, thinking about warming and fattening its ass in the tropics. This brain could be American. But perhaps the asshole has a mind of its own.

For the moment though, let’s think about this brain, and about the way that this brain has been thought about before. It may seem that I am making rather large claims for the meanings that might be elicited from mere buildings, letting both metaphor and economic context run riot. But the official discourse of Canadian architecture is already

peculiar. Consider this one example, from the 1980 edition of *The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture* by John Fleming, Hugh Honour, and Nikolaus Pevsner. The entry on “Canadian architecture” in that useful volume begins: “History and geography combined to make Canada a colony first of France, then of Britain and, finally, a nation entirely dependent for its continuing existence — unacknowledged as the fact may be — on the armed forces of a benevolent neighboring power. Its architecture manifests these circumstances.” At the outset, then, building in Canada is defined in unflattering geopolitical terms, terms that are reductive, paranoid, and profoundly conservative. How might we stand this architectural *realpolitik* on its head?

Considered separately, neither the original bank nor the new building is particularly noteworthy as architecture. I am more interested in the blunt intersection of two commonplace architectural styles, and in what happens, both symbolically and materially, within the space produced by that intersection. What are these styles? First, the neoclassical on the brink of the modern, a building tethered to the Enlightenment but seeking the authority of a new abstract efficiency of design: the bureaucratic banality of the 1930s. Second, the modern on the brink of its fragmentation and demise: the routinized corporate banality of the 1970s. Is this a harmonious or antagonistic marriage? The building’s defenders have emphasized the manner in which Erickson’s solar tinted glass and oxidized copper surfaces “mirror” and “reflect” — both literally and figuratively — the Victorian Gothic government buildings across the street. Erickson’s design has been described more critically as “deferential” in its relation to the “unimpressive” structure partially entombed within it. Or, as one of the bank’s brochures puts it rather guilelessly: “The original building was preserved to maintain historic continuity.” This bank is more Pharaonic than most. These readings argue that the bank’s success or failure rests on Erickson’s ability to harmonize the styles of the present and past. Another reading is possible. This reading detects a more cynical subtext. A style associated with commerce, but primarily with the state, is allowed to front for — while being swallowed up by — a style associated almost exclusively with commerce. It’s as if a large corporate headquarters building had taken on the original Bank of Canada as a façade.

What does this building say to the Canadian bourgeoisie? I’m assuming here that, whatever else this bank may say to the larger Canadian public, its most sophisticated meanings are reserved for those who are in a position to hire architects and worry about monetary policy. Are we hearing a hint of monetarism in the welfare state? Is this building, commissioned and constructed under a Liberal administration, secretly whispering Tory sentiments?

The building is both visible and invisible, exhibitionistic and unduly modest. I was allowed to photograph within some of the working areas of the bank, only to be accompanied by the bank’s chief of security, a former senior officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who took an occasional peek through the viewfinder for framings that might disclose too much of the bank’s inner workings. The building is both “open” and “closed” to nature, to human traffic, to the flow of commerce. Returning to the fundamental linkage between the old building and the new structure: the former stands as a “vault” to the latter, which suggests a lobby, the quasi-public space of commerce. This schematization of the essential features of any bank disguises the fact that the “real” vaults are underground, and invisible beneath the slate floor of the garden court. Thus the bank is both “democratic” and respectful of the privacy of capital.

Consider also the mirrored catwalks that traverse the atrium, connecting the interiors of the two glass towers with the interior of the old building, allowing for efficient traffic between the various departments and lending a sense of exterior space to the atrium itself. The opposed chromium mirrors that line the inside walls of the catwalks heighten the sense of openness, of unimpeded flows, of a happy and primitive narcissism. According to Erickson, for whom opposed mirrors serve as a signature of sorts, the serial regression of reflected images functions as a sign of infinity. This lunge at the legacy of the sublime falls flat on its own ubiquity. Opposed mirrors can be found in bathrooms, in airports, and in shopping malls, even in Sudbury. But here, in the Bank of Canada, more disturbing meanings emerge. First of all, the multiplicity of images offered by the mirrors is stopped short by the gaze of many surveillance cameras. However much the self may

seem to glide freely as an image within this space, *it can be tracked*. Second, the diminishing scale of the reflected images suggests a kind of attenuation, a loss of essence, or, to put things very crudely, the evaporation of surplus value in an economy increasingly based on speculation and paper profits.

The pervasive use of mirrors, the intersections of stone and glass, the circulation of water, the botanical garden: all these devices serve to confuse, to conflate, to overlay interior and exterior space. This is a space akin to that of the city as represented in Jacques Tati's film *Playtime*. But Tati's space of glass walls and mirrors and revolving doors — of specular confusion — is wholly cosmopolitan and urban, even if seen through the eyes of a disoriented tourist. By contrast, Erickson's space consistently returns to the image of nature, of an underlying primitivism, however much the *boundaries* between nature and culture are blurred.

The central, illuminated artifact in the botanical garden is a case in point. This big stone monetary doughnut from the island of Yap in the South Pacific stands as a "primitive" fetish, and as the Ur-token of an emerging culture of exchange. Again "historic continuity" is maintained. This theme is repeated within the currency museum, housed in the hindquarters of the old bank. There, the specific history of exchange in Canada is integrated neatly and emblematically into a global history of money. Thus the Hudson's Bay Company — now a chain of department stores — is credited with an exemplary role in the transition from a colonial barter economy based on fur trading to an economy based on the exchange of currency for goods.

What are we to make of this underlying "naturalism," this persistence of the image and memory of nature as the source of wealth? While Erickson is only problematically the "author" of this building — the Canadian bourgeoisie speaks through him — we can learn something from his own statements, then we can learn something else from Canadian economic history.

Erickson confesses to leaving two signatures in his designs: the doubled mirrors and a mound of earth somewhere on

the site. Here, at the Bank of Canada, two such mounds flank the old building, serving as bulwarks between the old and the new. Thus, despite the corporate and bureaucratic anonymity of the structure, we discover deliberate traces of a "subjectivity" split between a metaphysical idealism linked to optics and a primitive materialism linked to the earth. Erickson offers us a rather innocent caricature of an architect's desire.

Erickson has made two telling remarks. First, "I am fortunate that I can stand in Canada, a country without a culture, and look at the world." And second, "I have often thought that I was more of a landscape architect than an architect." Erickson invents himself here as a kind of cosmopolitan dandy outdoorsman. We've seen this figure before: the Canadian writer — played by Leslie Howard — camping out with his Picassos in the Rockies in Michael Powell's 1941 film *The Forty-Ninth Parallel*. Erickson stands with his boots in good, solid Canadian earth and his head in the international jet stream. The interest in landscape is specifically Canadian. As a teenager in the early 1940s, Erickson painted, and became friendly with the theosophist Lauren Harris, a central figure in that celebrated and immensely popular circle of Canadian landscape painters, the Group of Seven, whose work was produced, in the more cosmopolitan estimation of Canadian artist Michael Snow, too late, "*trop tard*." Thus Erickson's naturalism can be seen as a populist, and even nationalist, stance in its Canadian context.

The Canadian economic historian Harold Innis has described the Canadian mode of production as a "staples economy," an economy grounded in raw resource extraction: fishing, logging, mining, and so on. Canadian currency, with its encyclopedic engravings, celebrates this economy. Here is the productive complement to the "raw" nature depicted by the Group of Seven. More recently, the Canadian Marxist economist Leo Panitch has described Canada as a "rich dependency," possessing a branch plant economy dominated by American multinationals. Meanwhile, Canada's bourgeoisie plays a financial game abroad with its capital, investing in Third World countries, in American real estate, and so on.

The plight of the Canadian architectural profession is a

case in point. A recent report prepared for the government argues that Canada has an insufficient internal construction market to keep its architectural firms solvent. Canadian architects must find foreign commissions. Erickson, Canada's most prominent and successful architect, leads the hunt: building air force headquarters and military academies in Saudi Arabia and gargantuan commercial developments in the former "slums" of downtown Los Angeles. This latter project, the multistructure California Plaza, provides the necessary corporate framework for that developer-subsidized little postmodernist jewelbox, Arata Isozaki's Museum of Contemporary Art. Erickson's Canadian Embassy project in Washington places "Canada" at the doorstep of the United States capitol, while placing Erickson himself in a position to compete with I. M. Pei's East Wing of the National Gallery of Art. Thus the insistent logic of "free trade," of collapsing international borders, of a new breed of international entrepreneurs and professionals, resonates even within the rather limited political economy of architecture. Erickson's "liberal eclecticism" suits this program well.

The Bank of Canada whispers to the Canadian bourgeoisie in two voices. A nostalgic voice recalls the immensity of Canada's natural wealth. The bourgeoisie hears this whisper absent-mindedly, it knows that this wealth may not even be Canadian. A second whisper is more insistent: "Invest abroad, trade freely, you citizens of the world." Working-class Canadians are encouraged to hear only the first voice, to accept their relative comfort in the world of nations, this wealth that is theirs only in the imagination.

I have described a decentered space, a space that flaunts its departure from tradition. But this space also harbors a nostalgia for a centered hierarchy of value. The Yap stone, the neat chronology of money's progress, the garden, the preservation of the original bank, all conspire to obscure one salient point, which is registered symptomatically in every other aspect of the building. The new bank was commissioned in the wake of the 1971 collapse of the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement, which tied the American dollar to the gold standard, and all other currencies to the dollar, ensuring an American-dominated world system of currency equivalence. The Bank of Canada, then, is a bank for an

age of volatile and inherently unstable currencies, of currencies with no clear and consistent benchmark of value. This is a bank for an age of economic crisis.

There is one other, related irony in all of this. The design was formulated and approved before the 1973 escalation of world oil prices. Erickson's glass building gained notoriety for its inefficient use of heat, and required extensive modifications completed only in 1985. What better image of the late capitalist economy than this entropic financial regulator, bleeding heat into the Canadian winter?

The bank has its minor comforts, however. A French Canadian friend, who works in a government office in Ottawa, put it with a great deal of wit and charm: "It's nice to eat your lunch there in the garden in the winter, sitting above all the gold in Canada."